The Interaction Order of *Second Life*:

How micro sociology can contribute to online games innovation

Abstract

This paper uses the virtual world Second Life (as Web 2.0 environment) to discuss how sociological theory is a relevant tool for innovation in the area of games design as a methodological strategy. Via the theories of Erving Goffman's interaction order the paper illustrates how micro studies of online interaction demonstrate active accounts of membership and complex interactivity. In order to achieve this, the paper outlines a methodological tool to assist in the application of micro sociology to Web 2.0 environments that accounts for the multiple dimensions of participation within the digital field.

Key Words: Erving Goffman, Second Life, Interaction Order, Social Occasion, Human Dimensions Matrix.

Introduction

The following paper investigates how participants of the online 'game' Second Life (SL) are invested in behaviours which demonstrate their capacity to read the social order of the digital environment and sustain membership through interaction. SL is a unique environment in the 'online game' genre. It combines a multitude of interactional tools however it does not easily fit into classical idea of what a game ought to be within this domain.

What SL does represent is a particular type of "Web 2.0" participation between users of the environment and offers an important case study firstly into the local operation of digital participation and secondly the methodological implications for the study of "Web 2.0". There have been to date many studies on the nature of online environments from a player's perspective (Castronova 2004; Koster 2005; Geser 2007), a developers perspective (Banks

2007) and an overall cultural perspective (Rheingold 1993; Taylor 1999; Hine 2000; Fine 2006). The studies illustrate the problematic relationship between research and methodology in the digital sphere. This study seeks to illustrate how sociology may be able to facilitate with this relationship by drawing from Erving Goffman' s (1982) theories of the interaction order which he saw as a priority of research into the social world. Discovering the interaction order of online environments illustrates how the micro interactional orders are often taken for granted, however they provide an in-depth understanding into how participants are able to successfully communicate despite many of the technological obstacles in place. In doing so the study produces one methodological alternative to investigating online environments.

Approach and Methodology

The interaction order perspective is an approach that is analytically distinct. It facilitates a methodological enquiry of social actions, which enables 'social actors' to be seen as more than "the roles they fill". Instead its design is to elucidate what activities are required to perform that role. It is what Rawls (1987) describes as Sui generis. In this way actions have meaning with respect to the production order in which those actions are achieved in contrast to the "institutionally specific ends" that bounds the social activity (Rawls 1987: 137). Goffman's (1982) *Interaction Order* is a probing but thoughtful paper and probably the most complete reference to his conceptual model of the interaction order, as it explicitly takes into account his motivations and impetus for practice – something he regularly hides in the majority of his academic writing. Perhaps this is because, at the time, there was contention over his initiative that this piece is so explanatory.

> My concern over the years has been to promote acceptance of this face to face domain as an analytically viable one – a domain which may be titled, for want of a better name, the interaction order – a domain whose preferred method is microanalysis. My colleagues have not been overwhelmed by the case. (Goffman 1982: 2)

The interaction order is a name given to a body of theory that was developed over a substantial period of time in Goffman's career, but in itself it raises many questions about the design of face to face interaction and the order in which that interaction is achieved. Face to face interaction is an inclusive reference point for Goffman who believed that spatial and temporal zones of interaction had to be taken into account to make analytical sense. The contextual implications of activities occurring 'secondary' to conversational interaction are central to Goffman's argument; surrounding actions may impact on how interaction takes place. He did not presume context but forced the issue of context to interactional discourses (1981:188-91). In addition, the interaction order was a world beyond speakers and hearers, and active participation was not the sole requirement for membership in conversation. His position called for a greater understanding of the socially situated experiences of daily life, of cognitive states and bodily orientations (Goffman 1966).

Perhaps for Goffman it is the order, not the interaction itself that analytically means more. The presence of the interaction order is to illuminate the '*what'* in interaction; *what does a particular gathering, a particular conversation, a particular celebration allow for*? What does the structure of interaction, as a collaborative activity, permit its participants to do? The interaction order provides a multitude of resources to ask questions of and provide answers to the above. The following will look at conceptual tools of the interaction order, the social occasion and regional behaviour as theoretical underpinnings for the following research strategy.

The social occasion can classically be understood as a social frame that is bounded by temporal and spatial orders (Fine and Manning 2003). The occasion provides a necessary backdrop for the negotiation of face to face encounters by applying set normative codes of

practise for the participants within its frame. This backdrop acts as a practical guide for its participants in the application of appropriate behaviours, codes of conduct and structuring of the event. Thus a social occasion can exist as a celebration, like a birthday party or an everyday occasion such as day at the office/school/home. It is likely to be characterised by gatherings (two or more people co-present) and situations (mutual spatial environment) which also provide participants with an expectation of what is acceptable participation in the boundary of that occasion. Importantly the social occasion acts as a guide yet its rules and codes are unwritten, presupposed and commonsense.

> A society's members encounter the moral order as perceivably normal courses of action-familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted (Garfinkel 1984:35)

The codes are easily broken, and it is often in these breaches that the social occasion becomes noticeable, such as omitting crucial props from a birthday party like the cake or gifts, changes the meaning and expectations of the social occasion for those involved. Ritualised interactions often present themselves in the social occasion and participation is dependent on the understanding of highly contextual activities. Even a day at the office can become a mine field of rituals, from 'getting coffee' to 'asking for help'. Each will have steps that must be followed in order to get the desired outcome. Thus the social occasion draws together formal behaviours and interactions that negotiate the context of encounters by providing the background 'taken for granted' aspects of the social world whilst providing the necessary tools for the creation of a world in common for participants. Goffman recognised the complex layers of social occasions, where participation is often separated due to the social ordering of the setting.

The combination of Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks are a combined method of analysis to expose the formal structures of a 'production order' which provides

distance from institutional or situation structures which can be seen to 'govern' interaction (Rawls 1989). This production order allows order to be seen as a local production and is constructed in three ways; firstly through Goffman(1959; 1966; 1981) the structure of social activity is situated in many layers that organise and interpret meaning, such as setting, social occasions and footing; secondly Garfinkel(1984; 1986) interprets the context of mundane routines of action which demonstrate local productions of order; and thirdly Sacks(1995) similarly demonstrates local order production through the systematics of talk. The interaction, mundane conduct and conversation act as evidence of members' own accounts of localised regulation processes, produced and reproduced by the participants themselves. Importantly three theoretical underpinnings represent a methodology that systematically positions the participant in social space and further illustrates the organisation of such participation through a turn by turn analysis of members accounts' of regulation practises through their own conduct.

Data Selection, Collection and Analysis

Data was collected following theoretical sampling approach (Silverman, 1995). In order to understand the context for the interaction order operating within SL, theoretical sampling was needed to identify the ideal types of interaction as a first stage. This was warranted early in the study as it was noted that the local talk that was retrieved as data from SL was difficult to decipher using conversation analysis (CA) as an isolated tool. It was always intended on using Sacks' (1995) theories in a substantive approach to the study of interaction – but it became clear that the system that operated behind the conversation was critical to understanding SL. On the surface the conversation had no organisation and to read turn by turn produced limited meaning. However, this had little impact on the way participants understood the interaction locally. The disorder of conversation posed as no problem and

participants could produce response utterances that continued the conversation despite the confusion. The problem for CA was the absence of a system that explained what was occurring to produce coherence despite the chaos. This can be explained in the way communication occurs within SL.

Communication in SL occurs in the form of textual chat. All conversations are grouped at the bottom left corner of the screen in a rectangular opaque box. The chat feature of the screen when minimised takes up very little space on screen, the majority of the visual space is of the geographic location within SL. If maximised on the screen, chat is listed with the most recent utterance appearing at the bottom of the box. If an avatar is standing within close proximity to a number of interactions, they will be able to 'hear' the other conversations in and around their vicinity. This textual chat will be listed as it occurs regardless of which conversation it belongs to. Below is a screenshot illustrating how this appears:

The theoretical sampling approach enabled the collection of data that was relevant to what could be called an 'activity system'. That is it became obvious that the systematics of talk within context of SL were bound by a collaborative system between users that could not be fully understood in the systematics of talk. Goffman's (1982) theories of the interaction order demonstrated how multiple features of the environment constructed a 'user activity system'

that enabled participants to draw conclusions about behaviour and expectations. It was the activity system that constructed meaningful encounters and the ensuing interactions became evidence of the user activity system in action. It was these interactions that underwent systematic analysis as in the matrix below:

Relationship	Dimensions	Questions
Social	Participant / Participant	What relationships develop between participants? How do participants gain membership to the social world? How do the participants sustain membership to the social world?
Spatial	Participant /digital space	How do they currently relate to Second Life as a physical, social and cultural space? What digital obstacles affect the interactional outcome? How do participants use interaction to overcome the bounded experience?
Temporal	Participant/interactional sequence	How do participants maintain temporal order of interaction over time gaps and log in breaks?
Technical	Interaction order/ICT	What relationships do they currently and potentially have to the SL technology and the interaction it can provide?

This system, named the Human Dimensions Matrix was developed by Associate Professor Barbara Adkins and the author during an ethnographical analysis of a location based game at the Australasian Co-operative Research Centre for Interaction Design (2007). Overall the human dimensions matrix facilitates an empirical analysis of multiple categories in a systematic way and organises the data thus systematically identifying the interactions which best illustrate a particular relationship and dimension. The utility of the matrix is its research approach, which directs an ethnomethodological study via an overarching ethnographic structure. This matrix has been used in various studies to outline the aspects of digital participation in games (Jacobs and Polson 2006).

What is Second Life?

Second Life is a virtual world that is populated by avatars (virtual representation of the self). Avatars can travel the virtual 3D landscape in a variety of ways, most of these methods are similar to real life with the addition of teleportation and flying. There is no premise to SL other than being social, attending social events, contributing to social events and having interactive discussions with others in the context of the online environment and limitations of it. There is a university; conferences are regularly held as well as concerts; U2 famously performed live in 2008 (Hcho01 2008). Groups of avatars meet to discuss religion, philosophy and in-world issues. Mostly the world is a party-scene with a variety of music cultures existing in-world. It is not structured by a game narrative or designed with and end or beginning- it is perpetual.

As a particular type of environment SL makes distinctions between real life and virtual life difficult to draw, where participants 'own' land, buy goods and services and build many of the internal structures of the landscape themselves. SL has a thriving market economy based on these principles. The presence of the 'Linden Dollar' currency and functioning market running concurrently with the US market generates debate on the boundary crossing qualities of SL. Many are arguing that SL is much more than a game, calling for Linden Lab (the developer of SL) to become a registered financial institution. The Terra Nova blog article outlines this debate as it exists in the field of games academia (Bloomfield 2008).

If anything, the structure of SL is comparable to real life rather than a game. Its position in the game community is difficult to articulate particularly since the industry because the structure of the experience it offers is at odds with a traditional game definition:

> A game is a voluntary interactive activity, in which one or more players follow rules that constrain their behaviour, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome
>
> (Zimmerman 2004.)

The problem here is twofold; SL does not contain an artificial conflict and it has no quantifiable end. Further, the rules of/in SL do not constrain behaviour in the same way that conflict driven games do. SL is not a game but a simulation of real life played out in a digital landscape where social interaction is the defining principle.

Second Life as a Web 2.0 Environment

Marketing industries recognised earlier than others the need to explain (and sell) the change of digital behaviours and interactions via technology. While sociology had been invested in the area for quite some time (Baudrillard 1988; Castells 1996; Wellman 2002), it was the gathering of many thoughts into one catchy phrase that quickly got many talking about its effects on everyday life. “Web 2.0” was named by Tim O’Reilly (2005) to describe the change in uses of technology from a one way user as consumer to a two way user as producer and consumer. Recently Clay Shirky (2008) and Henry Jenkins (2006) have written a more comprehensive accounts on this phenomenon from a cultural perspective. From an academic perspective Web 2.0 is a feature that emphasises certain types of online behaviours over others, these tend to be social and collaborative with importance placed on the sharing of knowledge and information between networks of people (Ankolekar, Krötzsch et al. 2008). Web 2.0 technology can be explained as a platform that enables the connection of analogous applications to form a network, which operates in a synchronous mode(Adkins and Grant 2007). The applications connect information and communication between individuals within the network and allows users to upload, store, share information and communicate with each other in a web based environment. While Web 2.0 is a technical platform its overarching

principle is the social connectedness it makes available to users; distance, time and place are no longer obstacles separating connection.

Second life, because of its unique characteristics, can be classified as a Sui generis Web 2.0 environment. It intensifies the social and collaborative framework between users by bounding itself in a 3D setting through avatars and its market economy with the Linden dollar. It obviously is not a 'real' world in the tangible sense but it poses questions as to what is real and what is not and re-conceptualises the social domain online.

The social occasion as a vehicle for skill display in online environments

The social occasion's role is to reveal information to the participants so they may apply the necessary interactional behaviours that match the occasion they are in, such as applause at the correct intervals or laughter occurrences in the telling of a comical experience (Grant 2003). The organisation of social occasion is in effect the governance which enables talk or in the case of SL interaction to take place.

Participation is organised around 'getting it right' when it comes to interactions with others. An SL participant's acceptance into the community depends on their performance at any given time. "The [participant]…must conduct himself with great ritual care, threading his way through one situation, avoiding another, counteracting a third lest he unintentionally and unwittingly convey a judgement of those present that is offensive to them." (Goffman as cited in Manning 1992: 34) Participants in SL always have a choice to refer their two party interactions to a private setting and restrict others access to their conversation, but rarely is this choice made. Even the most private or personal discussions are delivered within the communal zone. Inside SL the social occasion is a vehicle for participants to illustrate the

depth to which they understand, firstly how interactions are framed and secondly how to deliver information successfully. Therefore this principle leads into the concept that participation in SL involves the "ordering of disorder" to illustrate ones skill at keeping up.

'Showing off' is not usually associated with ability, under normal circumstances it is seen as excessive and in some settings is seen as arrogant.

> Now when we show off, we are certainly trying to produce an effect on the audience: we talk, indeed, for effect; we try to impress, to evoke the response of admiration. But it is no part of the intention to secure the effect by means of the recognition of the intention to secure it. (Strawson 1964:452)

For SL, "showing off" opposes its traditional view and becomes an asset to the participant as it enables the illustration of skill in a very public display to others without the negative stigma. As Strawson above alludes to, in real life "showing off" occurs when others recognise the intention to evoke admiration. However for SL the need for an explicit act at demonstrating skill accounts for "showing off" as a necessary performance. The social occasion in SL is at the very heart of this procedure. It provides the structuring social process for participants to show off their abilities so that skill display becomes a major feature of participation which is enabled by the social occasion. The following extracts will demonstrate how the participants are using the occasion to show off their skill levels in various ways.

The first example highlights the diverse ways in which membership is achieved through showing off; here it is the understanding that multiple conversations will occur simultaneously and participants must decide whether to keep or discard conversations. A component of this is protecting the boundaries of others and in most cases participants' of both conversations stay true to their own parties. This reveals that behaviour within SL on one level is quite complex as it requires a strict and controlled knowledge of conversational

rules and boundaries which is quite different to real life. The following will look at two different encounters in SL to illustrate the ways that membership is achieved in complex interactions and explain how the interaction order can facilitate understanding of membership within these settings:

Encounter One

1 A: seems more i stay away
2 B: er try to
3 A: the more i dont fit
4 B: nooo
5 C: well, that's sad
6 D: it is
7 C: I like helping people
8 A: nite nite Amberly (-;
9 B: dont feel like that nunu
10 E: nighties
11 F: hm, all i have in there is the welcome area
12 A: it's cool
13 B: everyone is entitled to his or her opinions
14 A: nite (-;
15 D: god it's been a long time
16 D: wehre have you been?
17 B: weither we like em or not
18 C: heh
19 A: oh i will always come back
20 G: you have the inventory open righT?
21 A: my first *home
22 A: (-;
23 C: I've been busy with life really
24 G: at the top you can do a search
25 C: I moved
26 B: :)
27 D: Nubiian don't give up on us
28 F: yes, I looked in library and my inventory
29 G: k
30 F: what was it called?
31 A: lol@Lecktor
32 A: (-;
33 G: good places for new folks
34 F: oh, it's in it's own folder--i see it!
35 D: All right the sound files are old and tupid and against the CS so stop
36 C: plus my mom passed last month, that obviously warranted time to myself
37 G: great!
38 D: oh I'm sorry to hear that man
39 H: the air is thick with marijuana smoke
40 G: the inventory can be a scary place :P

41 F: oh wow, LOT's of place!
42 D: accept my condolences
43 E: Extra Medication for ALL =D!
44 C: no, it's alright, she is no longer in pain

In a similar fashion to normal conversations, in SL two or more conversations will appear to happen simultaneously. In one conversation a participant is being 'tutored' on SL basics, and in the other a participant is telling a story about the first life loss of their mother. In real life, we are usually able to evaluate appropriate distances and alter tone or volume to counteract the jumble of conversations; in SL the same is not permitted by virtue of how the computer program operates, as stated previously in the paper. Lines 36-38 show how easily misunderstandings could take place.

36 C: plus my mom passed last month, that obviously warranted time to myself
37 G: great!
38 D: oh I'm sorry to hear that man

Line 37 shows one response to an opposing conversation and how this can interfere with the message of loss from another. The exclamation of "great" is not deemed as an offence and is able to be discarded as a turn in the conversation between C and D. Even so G does not reply or apologise for such an inappropriate exclamation at a significant point in C and D's conversation but moves on as if nothing happened (see line 40). This method of aligning participation to one conversation is of particular interest, as it illustrates how attentive each participant must be to what is going on around them. The skill rests on participants to actively ignore utterances that do not belong to their conversation, which requires that they must attend to all utterances and discard the ones that do not belong to them. Goffman also saw this phenomenon and named it as the 'party wall'.

The Party Wall in Second Life

Goffman (Goffman 1959: 119) describes a party wall as the action of a back region that cannot be seen but it is clearly heard by participants not involved in the gathering, "Residents are aware of many 'vicinal' noises extending from the usual clamour of Birthday celebrations to the sound of daily routine". Where Goffman was describing a party wall as those in separate domestic establishments and not visible to one another, a parallel can be made with SL residents although they are in clear sight of each gathering. The invisible party wall allows 'vicinal noises' to intercept conversations without interrupting flow or meaning. This concept maintains conversations, which may intercept one another and brings into play some unique boundaries which have been altered by the residence themselves. Firstly, surveillance of the environment on screen is required to confirm who belongs to which group and thus conversation. For the party wall to work correctly, participants' must be able to place it between their gathering and others to enable it work effectively. They must also be able to place their own gathering as the front region – that is the formal interaction that established strong social boundaries and codes of conduct for the members involved (Goffman 1959: 114-116). In addition the front region maintains social order and rituals that feed interactions and for Goffman was a mechanism that set up an illusion of cultural expectations of ritualised interactions and performances; it is a device that hides the work that goes into social order.

Screenshot 1 below illustrates that groups of avatars exist as they would in real life if they were in a conversation with each other. The avatars at the table are one group, a bystander watches from behind and another group exists behind her. Screenshot 2 illustrates a more dispersed set of people, with many bystanders and one large group of participants' and a few smaller sets. In any case the utterances would still be listed in temporal order with participants forming their own 'walls' around their parties.

Screenshot 1

Screenshot 2

Participants must utilise these types of images on screen to maintain their party wall. Secondly, as well as surveillance of the visual environment, all utterances need to be read by a participant in order for ownership of an account to be accepted or declined. In addition the speed to which this must be determined is important to preserve the conversation at hand and stay 'present' to the moment so that any utterance a participant adds is seen as relevant at the time it is entered into sequence.

The invisible party wall plays an important role in maintaining coherence and conduct for the participants. Encounter three below illustrates how easily the delicate balance of boundaries and the invisibleness of the party wall can be eroded.

Encounter Two.

1 A: hello
2 B: hm that it just what i tried to find out
3 C: Private discussion
4 B: i do not know, it was a kind of a tutorial
5 C: please leave A
6 D: so sexy
7 C: you see the bottom of your screeN
8 B: yes
9 C: ok

Here A is clearly told that this is a ‘private discussion’ but C but has not visually shown themselves to ‘leave’ the conversation. C in the end must explicitly tell A to ‘please leave’. This indicates that visual proximity to a gathering is quite important, especially as A has shown an intent to include themselves into this gathering. Upon being told of its private nature A has not taken visual steps to remove themselves and is in clear proximity of the conversation between B and C.

For order and interpretation to be upheld by participants they must preserve the boundaries of their interactions. Thus the party wall can only work if participants uphold continuity of their own conversations and actively ignore others around them. Encounter three demonstrates the intensity of the party wall and the implications of breaching the invisible boundaries. It is also a significant illustration of what happens when a participant upsets the social occasion. While the utterance “please leave A” does not seem unusually offensive, it is much more abrupt than one would expect, especially in an environment that is defined by sociality. There are no rewards for mistakes in this setting and isolation remains a constant threat in the maintenance of the social occasion.

Behaviours in this space require an enormous attention to detail which is why the display of skill is necessary. Residents must firstly be aware of their visual proximity to others, constantly surveying the environment for other residents invested in their conversation, whilst keeping an active knowledge of who is not. Secondly residents must remain aware of utterances those utterances which belong to them whilst discarding others. Thirdly, residents must pay careful attention to conversations that are not open to their presence to avoid eroding the party wall between conversations.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated some important features about interaction in online worlds, specifically Second Life, but the implications of these findings need not be confined to its subject.

This study indicates that despite the bounded apparatus of computer mediated communication, participants are able to overcome interactional barriers and create meaningful encounters. This suggests that the 'user friendly' capacity of computer programs may not influence the attrition rates of players. More so the programs support of individual displays of skill, through simple social contact, where participants can show how they understand the context of the environment they are attending to is more important, perhaps an area of future study.

More pertinent to this paper was the discovery of the intricate techniques in which online participation occurs .Membership can be shown as an elaborate mechanism. For Second Life particularly, these mechanisms allowed participants to show their skill level through each interaction. It is in participants' best interest to seek out interactions in order to show their expertise in a skilful display of 'getting it right'. Goffman's interactional theory was useful in drawing out these social tools, illustrating the shared dexterity participants' must use to gain membership into in specific social settings, what can be called a "user activity system" . The user activity system is a methodological tool that is accessed via the human dimensions matrix. The matrix systematically layers interactions via the relationships of social, spatial, temporal and technical aspects of 'game play'. This layering produces an account of the interaction order in Second Life that is cognizant of participants' own understanding of how interaction is achieved in that setting. In doing so the activity system is not biased towards a

technological device but how the device is 'overcome' in the production and maintenance of social order in that setting. The importance of this system for Web 2.0 is the access it provides to the discreet qualities of social connections and interactivity within specialised contexts. This distances itself from the technical design of the environment toward the social aspects that make the environment distinct. The user activity system demonstrates a system that accounts for several contexts of Web 2.0 and can elucidate the properties of digital environments that are prioritised by users.

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